

Beautiful Girls

by Jason Lee Norman

And it was one of those summers. One of those summers that comes around every once in awhile with plenty of sun and heat and long days but somehow the nights felt even longer. And it was one of those summers about shared experiences. We all shared the same memories. We all remembered the fire at the Vietnamese restaurant, the blackout, the thunderstorm that came out of nowhere and flooded our streets and basements. We all remembered that local sports team's victory, the free concert in the park, and we all remember the first day women's bodies started washing up along the banks of the river.

It happened with such regularity that it just became another summer *thing* like the heat or the thunderstorms, an event that signalled the passing of another day.

The women they pulled out of the river, by the accounts of the first to find them, were all young women. The police chief said that they were dressed like sluts. Shirt cut low, skirt cut high. The type of girl who had it coming, like waving raw meat in front of a hungry animal. Everyone nearby clicked their teeth as if they knew what that was supposed to mean and breathed a collective sigh of relief and with no trace of fault. They were dressed a certain way which meant they *were* a certain way which meant none of the rest of us had anything to fear. We went back to enjoying our summer.

And summer seemed to get better after the bodies started appearing. There was an order to things. Crime was something random but this, this felt like part of a larger scheme. It made everybody feel better- not worse.

The dead girls became part of a little schoolyard type of song. One that children might shout while playing hopscotch or skipping rope. The beginning could always change but the end part would stay the same:

'and all the beautiful girls are in the river
And they went in dirty
But they came out clean'

It sounded almost spiritual. It became a thing that you said while enjoying an evening out on the porch, sipping lemonade with bourbon.

'and all the fishes are in the sea and all the birds are in the sky. God's in his heaven and all the beautiful girls are in the river. They went in dirty but they came out clean.'

Mothers used the dead girls to frighten their children before bed. "You be good and say your prayers and finish those vegetables. Ask God to bless mommy and daddy or you'll end up like those poor girls in the river."

Some started to wonder, however, who might begin to wash up next. The police chief told everyone not to worry. It was a lifestyle thing, a behavioural thing. If we all just dressed a certain way or acted a certain way there was nothing to worry about. The police in the station, firemen in the fire hall, the Devil in Hell and all the beautiful girls are in the river.

Some wondered what might happen when winter eventually came. What if more women started to appear floating in the half frozen river and we could all hop from body to body like polar bear cubs or lumber jacks in British Columbia. Where would we put them all? What if it never stopped? It was a housekeeping issue, not a morality issue. We had morality all figured out.

And it was one of those summers where nothing ever hurt and we didn't have to worry. And it was the perfect summer to fall in love. The heat slowed down the pace of everything just right. Just like it slowed the river to a lazy crawl and those dead girls floated down like crocodiles and the police chief said we didn't have to worry. We probably didn't even know who they were and they were probably from another city up river anyway. Some place where they let their women look a certain way and act a certain way. Nobody *we* knew would ever be found floating like that.

And because eventually everything comes to an end, so did this. Some of us wondered if the world had run out of beautiful girls. The type of girls who looked a certain way and dressed a certain way and who sometimes even looked at you a certain way. A way which made you feel invincible and very very warm. Like summer.

And eventually summer ended. Leaves fell off the trees and instead of a shoes scuffing on the sidewalk sound there was a shoes crunching leaves on the sidewalk sound. Families dressed in light sweaters and had their photos taken in the park. And the end of summer meant that there was so much to do before winter came. In winter we all slept; everything stopped.

And we all went back to work and the kids went back to school. The priests were in their churches, bees in their hives, babies all tucked in bed, hens in the hen house, stars in the sky.

And all the beautiful girls were in the river. They went in dirty but they came out clean.

